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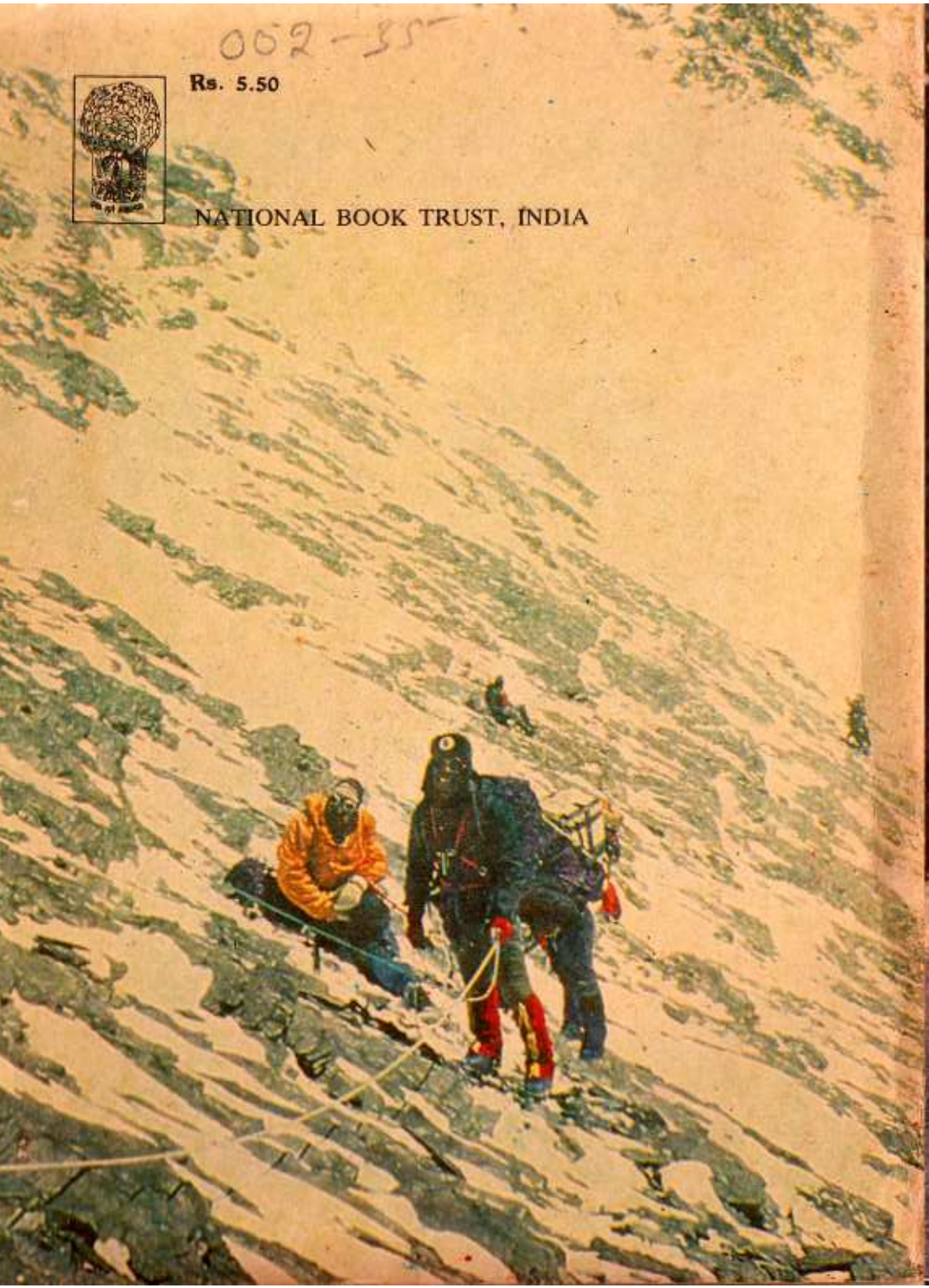

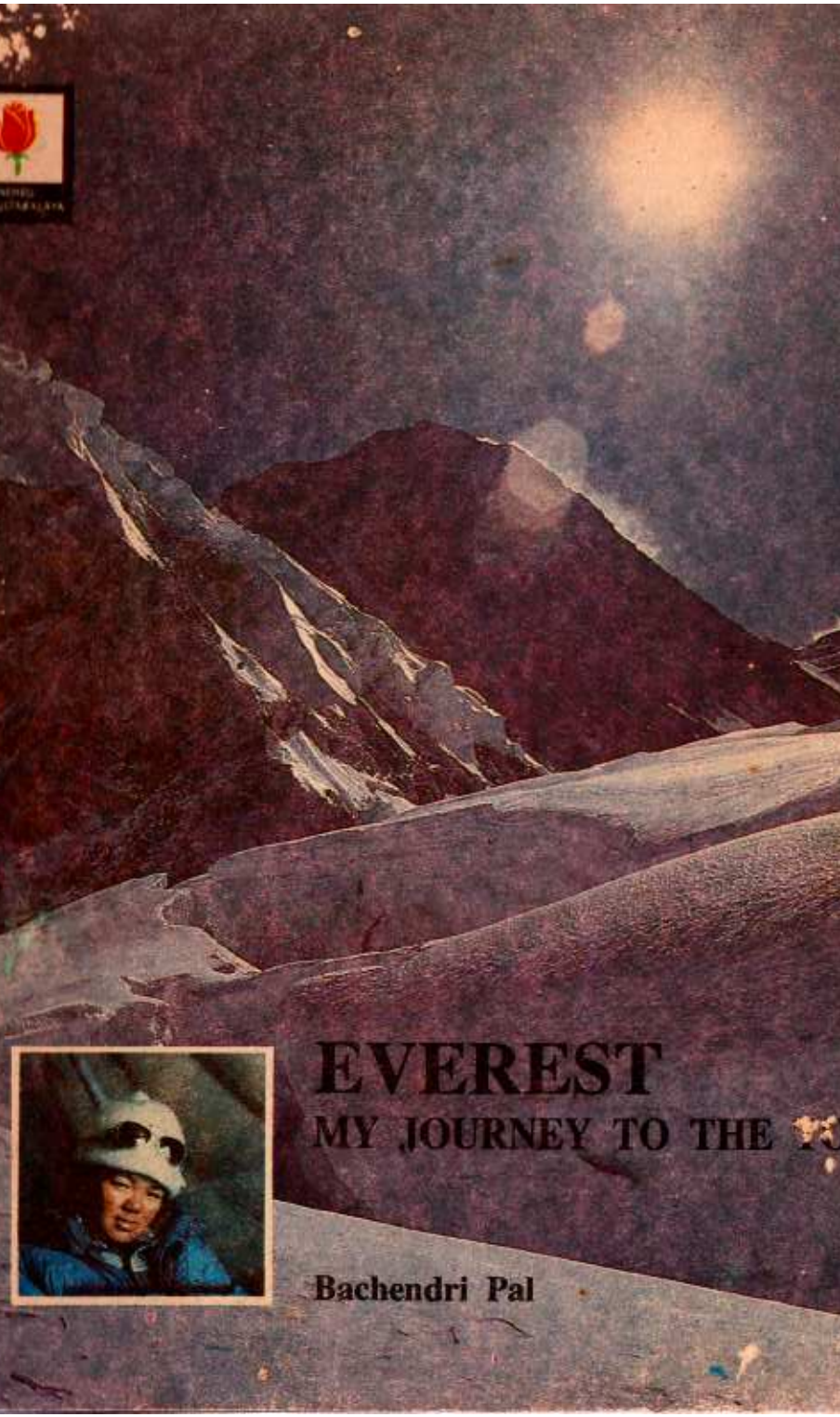

EVEREST
MY JOURNEY TO THE T

Bachendri Pal

JOURNEY TO THE PEAK

First Edition 1989
Second Edition 1991
First Reprint 1992 (*Saka* 1913)

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Rs. 5.50

Cover & page 31 photograph: Sanjeev Seth

Published by the Director, National Book Trust, India
A-5, Green Park, New Delhi 110 016

Nehru Bal Pustakalaya

Everest
My Journey To The Top

by

Bachendri Pal

in collaboration with

Brig. Gyan Singh

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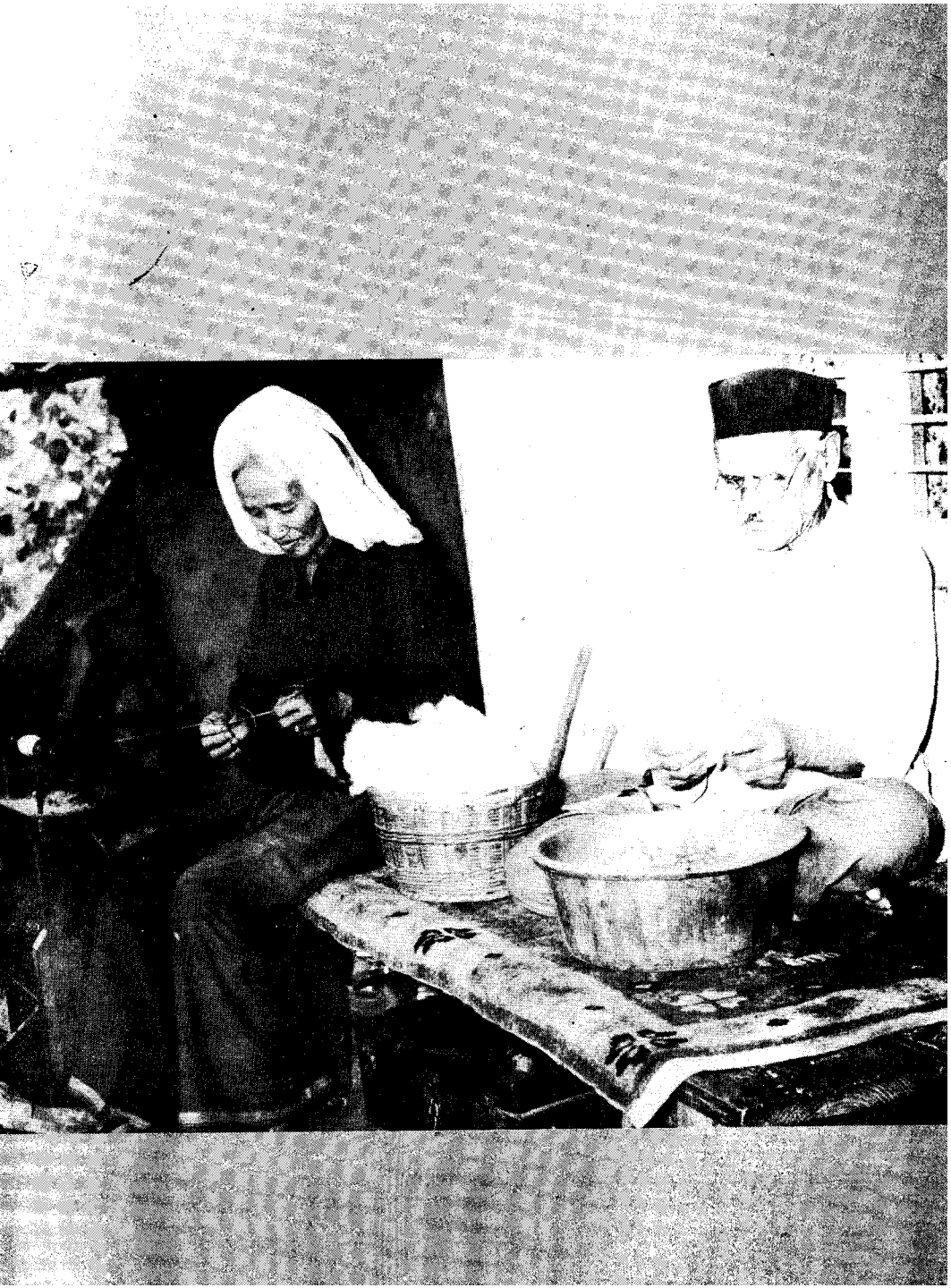


←My father and mother at work

FAMILY ROOTS

My father's name is Kishan Singh Pal. He was born in 1901 in Bampa, a small mountain village which was part of the border district of Chamoli, in the Garhwal Himalaya. The village spread over both sides of the river, the gurgling, playful Dhauli Ganga.

My father is short and stocky. Like his father before him and most others of the area, my father was a small border tradesman. There were no roads in the region so he used mules, horses and even goats to carry his goods. He took *atta*, rice, barley, *mishri* (candy-sugar) from India to Tibet. In Tibet he would either sell or exchange Indian goods for wool, mineral salts, specially rock-salt, goats and sheep.

My father, however, was not very successful in business and at the age of 35 decided to move to new pastures. He left Bampa and made his new home in Nakuri, a small village of about 15 houses, perched on the right bank of the Bhagirathi Ganga, some 12 kilometres south of Uttarkashi.

Kishan Singh married a Nakuri girl, Hansa Dei Negi. Eighteen-year-old Hansa was half her husband's age but though they were different in many ways, they got on well. The sturdy,

short Kishan Singh was stern and quick-tempered while Hansa Dei was soft-skinned, delicate and tall for a Garhwali girl. She spread sunshine around her and was tender hearted.

My parents raised a happy family. Five children in a row: girl, boy, girl, girl and boy, in that order. I was the third child.

Like all border villagers of the region, we had two homes—one at Nakuri, the other at Harsil. In winter, when Harsil was snowbound, we lived in Nakuri. For the six summer months we moved up to Harsil at a height of over 2,500 metres where there was good grazing for the goats, sheep and the cattle on the higher slopes. Along with the other families which had come from eastern Garhwal, we lived in a small village in the Harsil valley. But the village was washed away in a flash-flood in 1943, making us homeless for the summer months.

My father and the others who had been displaced tried to buy some land and build new houses in the valley but the local people put such obstructions in the way that we had to rent a house to live in during the summer. We passed through many difficulties, but Father would neither bribe nor cringe for a favour. He preferred to remain poor, and maintain his self-respect. Ultimately, we decided to stay at Nakuri all the year round.

My father stopped his business in raw wool and rearing animals and the family started producing finished goods, weaving carpets and waist-bands worn by the Garhwali women and knitting sweaters. Father also bought a small plot of land some distance away on which he grew food crops for the family. Despite all our hard work there was never enough for the needs of the family.

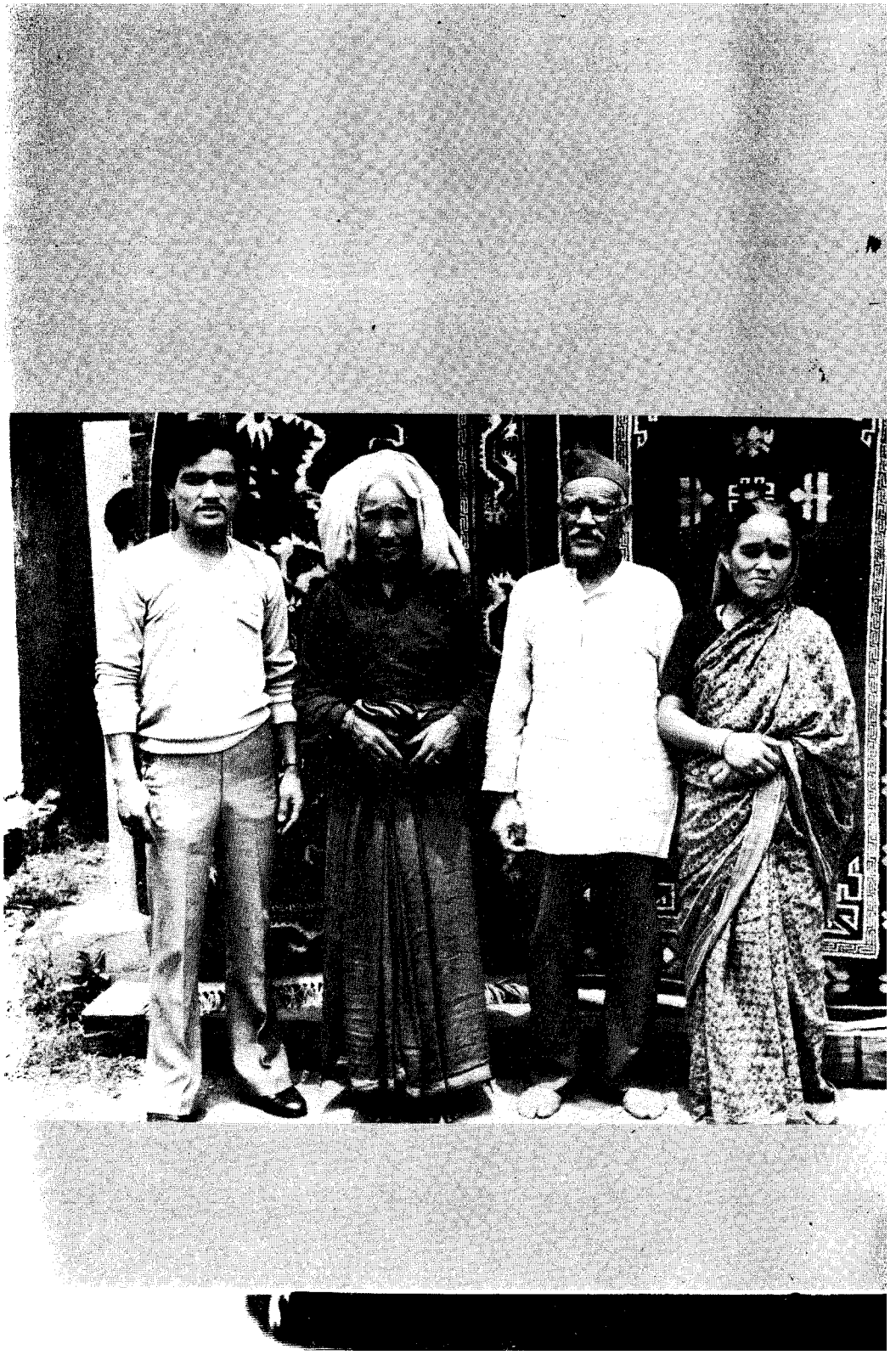
My mother at the loom →

THE PAL FAMILY

The first child, a girl, was born in 1945 and named Kamaleshwari. She went to school when she was quite young but had to leave after Class VI. The family could not afford her further education. Kamla had to do her share of work at home and outdoors. She had to fetch firewood and fodder from the forest and carry water for the household. I know what being a girl in Garhwal means. I have done all the back-breaking work myself, but not as much as Kamla Didi did. We, too, learned to weave carpets. My sister was a very good weaver. I was not bad at it either. But I was restless and did not like indoor work.

Next to arrive in the family, six years after Kamaleshwari, was Bachan Singh. My brother was good at his studies but his real love was the mountains and climbing difficult routes. He was also an outstanding sportsman. After his graduation, he was recruited as an Inspector in the Border Security Force (BSF) and prevailed on the BSF authorities to send him to be trained in mountaineering at the Nehru Institute of Mountaineering (NIM) in Uttarkashi. He completed the basic and advance mountaineering courses with top grading.

I was born on 24 May, 1954. According to my parents, I was



My parents (centre), younger brother and elder sister.
In the background: carpets woven by the family →

the noisiest of all their children. I cried a lot and the loudest. I kept my parents on their toes. There was never a dull moment in the family after I arrived.

The next child was Upama, three years after me. She studied up to Class IX. I teased my little sister a lot but Upama and I were good friends. Like my elder sister, Upama was a typical hill-village girl—well-behaved, gentle and domesticated. I was the only rebel.

The youngest child of the family, Rajender Singh was born three years after Upama. Raju was strong and a good sportsman. My elder brother was always urging Raju to take part in outdoor pursuits like mountaineering. This made me angry. "Why only Raju? Why can't I also take mountaineering courses?" I would ask. For much as I loved my brothers, I resented the boys getting more attention and opportunities than us girls. I was determined not to take a back seat in the Pal family and to not only do what the boys did, but do it better.

CHILDHOOD

Father was the centre of authority in the family. I knew it even as a child. I was an irrepressible chatterbox and always up to mischief. My pranks amused my stern father and I thought I could do no wrong in his eyes. Sometimes, however, I overplayed my hand.

One day my father was reciting the Ramayana. I tried various ways to attract his attention but he took no notice of me. Unused to being ignored, I continued to disturb him with my chatter and antics. He admonished me a few times, but to no avail. Ultimately, Father reached the end of his tether. Picking me up, he walked across the terrace and flung me down the slope. I would have tumbled right down but luckily, I was able to grab the sturdy branch of a bush and cling to it for dear life. So shocked was I that I could not breathe and turned blue in the face.

There was complete pandemonium in the family. My normally gentle mother charged like an enraged tigress towards her husband and shot a mouthful of angry words at him. Father rushed to my rescue and picking me up, held me close to him. Though I was now safe, I let out a blood-curdling scream. Father was already full of remorse. The piercing shriek upset him

further. Everyone fondled and fussed over me. I thoroughly enjoyed this and purred with contentment.

Unlike my sisters who went out only when they had to, I loved going for walks in the forest or the mountains. I would insist on accompanying my father when he went out and threw a tantrum if he refused to take me with him.

One day when I was about four, my father took me to the fields nearly two kilometres away. The next day my parents set off alone. Though I begged to be taken and cried myself hoarse, they did not relent. My brother was asked to keep an eye on me. After some time I fell asleep and my brother went off to play. When I woke up I made straight for the fields where we had gone the previous day. I crossed a number of small water channels and kept going on and on, hoping to find my parents. When my feet could carry me no further, I sat down to wait for them and, after a while, I lay down and fell asleep.

There was panic when my parents returned in the evening. I had been missing for some hours and no one knew where to look for me. They feared that I might have gone out and been swept away in one of the rivulets. Poor brother Bachan got a sound thrashing. Following his instinct, my father then took the track of the day before and saw my footprints on the rain-wetted path. He followed the trail and found me fast asleep nearly two kilometres from home. Instead of my parents showing any anger, I showed mine. They only laughed in relief.

When I was young, my elder brother Bachan was my hero. He was strong and confident. When we went on climbs or on walks I could not keep up with him so he avoided taking me with him. One day, he had to go into the hills to cut leaves for the cattle. He left me behind but I followed him quietly.

Bachan was busy lopping branches and did not see me as I approached. He had made a wide swipe with his sickle when he suddenly noticed me. He tried to hold back but it was too late. The point of the sickle nicked my skull.

I started bleeding profusely. I was in pain but I did not cry. In fact, I felt sorry for my brother. He looked worried and scared. He tried to wipe off the blood with leaves. When the bleeding did not stop, he crushed some medicinal plants and pressed them on the wound. The bleeding stopped and brother Bachan washed my face and the other blood-stains in a stream.

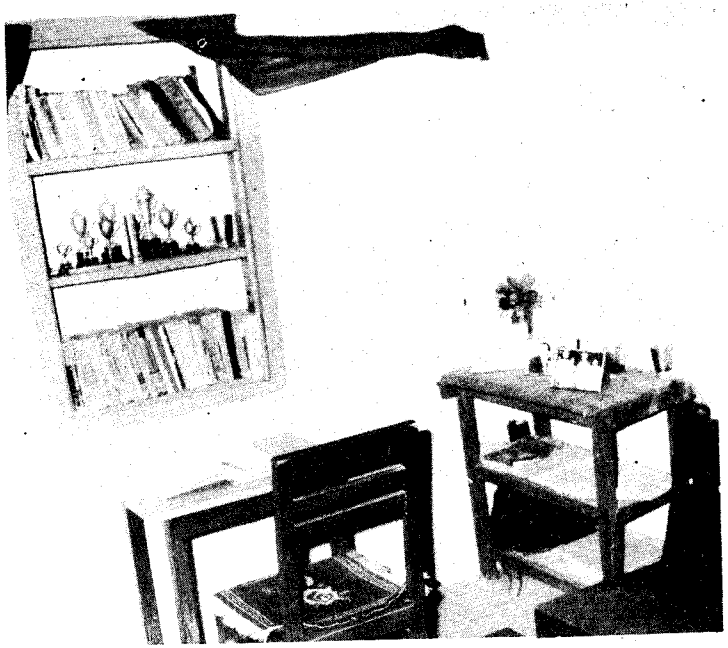
Before reaching home, Bachan made me promise that I would not tell anyone about my injury. He also asked me to avoid having a bath for some time.

I kept my word but after a few days my mother noticed how I was avoiding bathing and, catching hold of me, dragged me to the stream. While washing my head she saw the matted hair and when she washed it out the wound started bleeding again. My horrified mother tried her utmost to find out how I had hurt myself. But I was determined not to let my brother down. I kept a stony silence. Finally, my brother confessed. He told Mother how he had hurt me accidentally. Everyone was amazed by my self-control.

I was a great dreamer. I never thought anything was beyond my reach. If a magazine or a newspaper had a picture of the Prime Minister meeting young people, I would declare, "I will meet Indira Gandhi." When a car drove past on the road below our house I would say, "I will own a car when I grow up." But aeroplanes attracted me the most. Whenever I saw a plane or a helicopter, I said excitedly, "One day I will fly in an aeroplane."

The family was poor and could not even afford the bare

essentials. My parents were sad that their child lived in a world of dreams which could never be fulfilled. But the younger members of the family enjoyed my seeming fantasies and egged me on. I did not need much encouragement. I would keep talking about cars, aeroplanes and the important people I would meet. When my brothers and sisters burst out laughing I would raise my voice, stand up and shout, "Wait, I'll show you."

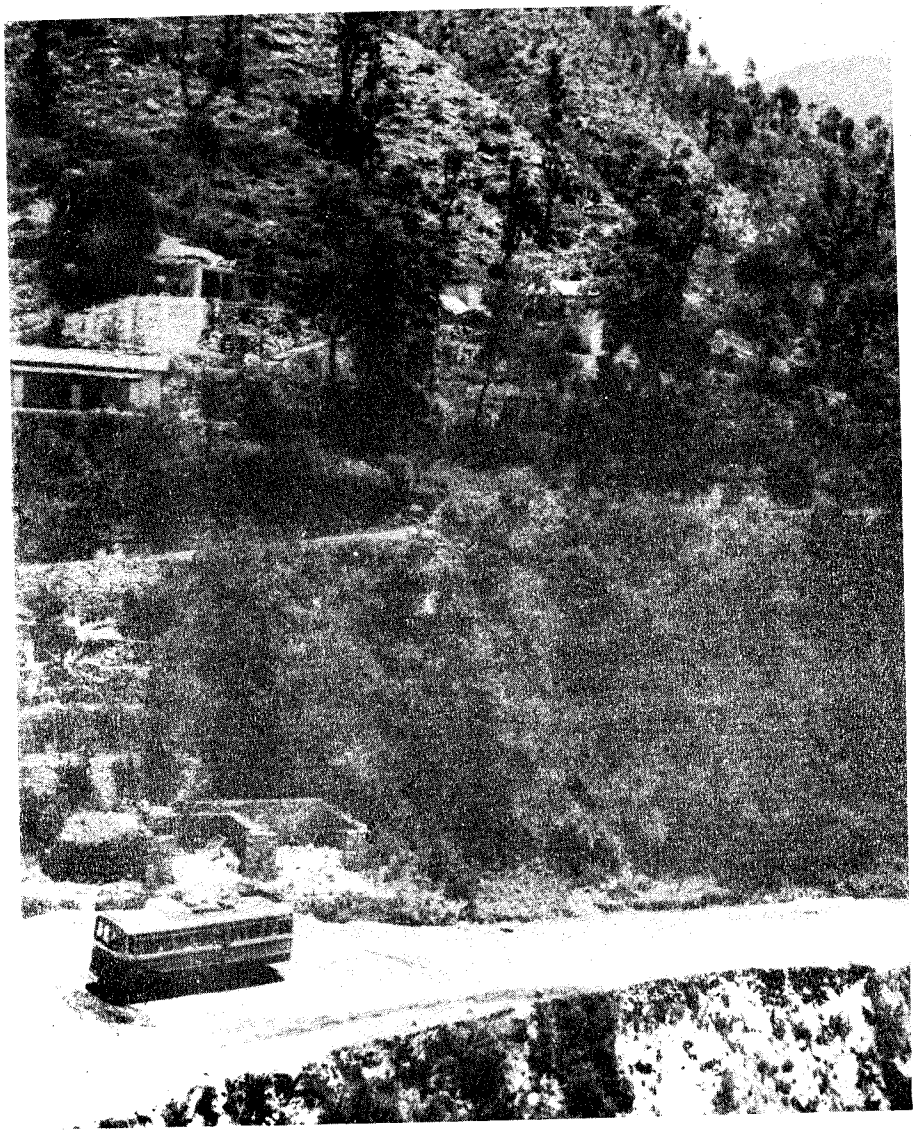


My study

SCHOOL DAYS

I joined Dunda-Harsil Junior High School when I was just five-years-old. As the school's name indicated, it functioned from both Dunda and Harsil. In the winter, Harsil was under a blanket of snow so the school moved to Dunda, five kilometres from my village, Nakuri. Come summer, and most of the lower village population, including the school, shifted lock, stock and barrel to Harsil. I enjoyed the long trek every six months. Herding our cattle and cuddling new-born sheep and goat kids, we would pick flowers and berries and play hide-and-seek on the boulder-strewn mountain slopes. When tired, we rode a horse or mule. Being familiar with the camping sites on the way we ran ahead the last two or three kilometres to gather dead wood for cooking. I also loved living in tents. And, then there was the excitement of going to school in a new place.

This exposure to nature made me independent and fearless. At the age of ten, I often explored the woods and the hill slopes alone. In spring I would sneak out to watch the flocks of migrating birds which had spent the winter in the plains. I also brought home from my wanderings the popular flower, the 'Brahma-kamal', and armfuls of the scarlet blossoms of the



Nakuri, my village

rhododendron whose petals made a refreshing drink.

I was the most mischievous of my class. One incident I remember clearly concerned a young teacher who had a very fair, smooth complexion. All the girls, including myself, envied her and were curious to know the secret of her beauty. So, one day, I slipped out of her class with two trusted friends, and prying open the window, entered her room. We were peering into the many bottles and jars on the dressing-table when we heard footsteps outside. We hid hurriedly under the bed. The teacher came in with a long, thin stick which she immediately thrust under the bed. We shrank back to the farthest corner. But then, one of my companions giggled. Punishment followed swiftly. Being the ring-leader, I got the maximum number of strokes. The last one got away with half the amount because the stick broke.

There ended my search for beauty. Whenever I think of the incident and the subsequent punishment, I shudder at the thought of beauty-aids. I still don't use any make-up.

I liked going to school. I would get up early in the morning and help Kamla Didi or Mother prepare my pack-lunch and was always the first to reach the meeting-place of the group which walked to school.

I wanted to excel in every outdoor activity, particularly in the competitions with boys and would practise diligently before the annual sports for races such as the three-legged, sack or those involving threading a needle and balancing a pot of water on the head. Since I did fairly well in my studies, my parents encouraged my interest in games and were very proud when I came home with a prize.

One Sunday morning when the school was in session at Harsil, ten of us, girls and boys, decided to go up the mountain

tor a picnic. We reached the snow-line after 3,500 m. and were delighted with the feel of crunchy snow under our feet. We climbed higher and higher until one of the girls complained of hunger. Then finding an exposed outcrop of rock we settled down for lunch. Assuming we could drink from some hill stream or spring we had brought no water, but at that height (nearly 4,000 m.) everything was under snow. So we quenched our thirst by eating snow.

Our troubles really began on our homeward journey. It was late in the afternoon and the slope was no longer in the sun. The snow had hardened and was very slippery. The climb down was, therefore, not only slow but also dangerous.

To add to our woes, several of the party had headaches and nausea. One boy threw up his lunch. We thought it was due to food poisoning or the contaminated snow we had sucked. There was also a common belief that this strange sickness was caused by the smell of certain flowers and leaves found at these heights. I now know that these symptoms were due to a shortage of oxygen in the thin air which occurs at an altitude of about 3,000 m.

As darkness descended, we had to halt and make a partial overhead cover with branches. We had no food, no water and spent a cold miserable night, waiting for daybreak.

When we reached home the following morning, we received little sympathy—instead, we were rewarded with a beating. But this did not deter me. I had tasted the excitement of climbing the mountains and nothing could now hold me back.

EDUCATION

I was nearly thirteen and had passed my Class VIII exam with good marks when my father said that he could no longer afford to send me to school and I should help at home. I had, however, set my heart on higher education, so during the day I did my full share of work and more, and borrowing my friends' school-books, I studied on my own till late into the night. My keenness and determination impressed everyone and finally my mother and sister Kamla pleaded with Father and I was allowed to join Class IX.

I knew we needed money for my education so I learnt to stitch and earned Rs. 5 to 6 daily making shalwar and kameez suits. My earning while learning helped me to continue at school. I did well in my studies but even better in sports. I came first in most disciplines in which I participated and won many cups in field events like the shot-put, discus, javelin and in sprinting.

But after I passed the high school examination, my father was firm about my not joining college. It was the same problem: the family didn't have enough money. Then my Principal intervened. She wrote saying that I had missed the first division by only three marks and as an "all-rounder", I had a bright future. Once again

Father relented and I joined intermediate classes in physics, chemistry and biology, with an eye on doing my pre-medical. Though I passed my intermediate science, I could not cope with the pre-medical examination and switched to arts. I took Sanskrit in my B.A. chiefly because of my love for the Himalaya. I knew that Kalidasa's *Kumarsambhava* and other Sanskrit literature were rich with references to these mountains, which are called "the measuring rod of the earth" by Kalidasa.

I was allowed to do my B.A. but the family's resistance to my further education continued. It made no difference to my resolve. Nothing and no one was going to deter me.

I also won prizes in rifle-shooting and first-aid in joint competitions for boys and girls. I remember one particular contest in which we were blindfolded and had to dismantle and reassemble a rifle, a sten-gun and a Bren light machine-gun against time. I stood first. My class-teacher was very happy and taunting the boys, said that girls would now have to defend the country. The boys should wear bangles and sit at home.

After my B.A. I faced no further obstructions to my education for by then Father wanted me to be the first girl in the village with an M.A. degree. I did my M.A. in Sanskrit from DAV College, Dehradun and then my B.Ed. from Garhwal University, Srinagar.

Higher education had been my first goal. I had, therefore, curbed my strong mountaineering urge. Now that I had an M.A. and B.Ed., I could realign my sights and put my heart and soul into mountaineering.

I LEARN TO BE A MOUNTAIN CLIMBER

I was keen to join the NIM and become a good mountaineer, despite my mother feeling that it was too risky for girls. But I had not forgotten my father's sacrifices to give me a good education. It was my turn to do something for the family. I applied to a number of colleges for a teaching job but received offers only of temporary low-paid posts, and that too at primary level. I was not prepared to devalue my hard earned academic qualifications and declined these.

Instead of sitting idle at home, I applied to the NIM to join their Basic Mountaineering Course but all the vacancies had been filled for the year. I gained admission the following year, however, and learnt the techniques of climbing on rock, snow and ice and experienced the thrill of rappelling, that is, coming down a high vertical rock or ice-face in a matter of seconds with the help of a nylon rope. We were also taught camping methods and safe ways of crossing mountain rapids.

Major Prem Chand, the NIM's Vice-Principal was the training officer. He was known to be a strict instructor who demanded a very high standard of performance. I thought I had probably done well enough to get the silver ice-axe and a certificate but in

Rappelling down a steep rock face

fact I had been awarded 'A' grading, and was declared the best student of the course. In his report the Vice-Principal even put me down as "Everest material". At that point of time I paid no attention to this.

When I heard that the Indian Mountaineering Foundation (IMF) was planning a mixed expedition to Everest in 1984 and that there was a search for women with talent and experience in mountaineering, I gave it no thought as I could claim neither at this stage. I was, therefore, surprised to receive a letter from the IMF telling me that I had been selected for a screening camp for the Everest expedition. I was asked to confirm that I would attend the camp.

How could they possibly consider me for Everest? I had done so little mountaineering. Everest was indeed a far cry. Being doubtful of my calibre for such an important venture, I didn't reply to the IMF. I thought only of my next training course. In October 1982 I was given a vacancy on an advanced course. During this we learnt more advanced climbing skills on rock, snow and ice. We were also given training in planning an expedition. As part of high altitude experience, I climbed Black Peak or Kala Nag (6,387 m.).

On this course, too, I got an 'A' grade and was recommended for participation in expeditions. My instructors were very encouraging and said that I had the makings of a good mountaineer. I should take every opportunity to improve my climbing skills. It was about this time that I received a reminder from the IMF about participating in the Everest screening camp. When my instructors learnt about my having ignored the IMF's earlier letter and about the reminder, they said, "Don't you realize that you are throwing away a golden opportunity, Bachendri?" At

their urging, I, therefore, confirmed my acceptance.

After that I was a transformed person. If the IMF considered me a possible candidate for the Everest team, I could not let them down. I enthusiastically volunteered for all the domestic chores that involved climbing. To toughen myself, I would carry heavier and heavier loads of grass, fodder and firewood home. My choice of the daily routes changed. I would choose steeper and more difficult paths and deliberately went over boulders or climbed steep rock faces to acquire better balance and get over vertigo or fear of heights. All my activities were aimed at making me a really competent climber.

I attended the Gangotri screening camp in the latter half of 1982. My instructors were very pleased with my performance and during this training I climbed Gangotri I (6,672 m.) and Rudugaira (5,819 m.). I gained confidence in my climbing ability.

Soon afterwards, I was informed that I was tipped for the final selection camp in September-October, 1983.

BHAGIRATHI SEVEN-SISTERS

I was happy with the manner in which my mountaineering career was shaping but it did not solve my or my family's economic problems. Then, in February 1983, Brig. Gyan Singh, Director of the National Adventure Foundation (NAF) came to Uttarkashi to run an adventure course for teachers at the NIM and selected seven local, educated women, including me for scholarship.

I confided in this eminent but understanding senior mountaineer and told him that my parents were pressing me to get married to reduce the financial burden on the family. I asked him to find a way for those who were poor to earn a living, using our interest and skill in mountaineering.

Next morning Brig. Gyan Singh asked us to fill in the NAF's application forms to start the "Bhagirathi Seven-Sisters Adventure Club". Explaining that this would be a unique organization of girls and women to help other girls find adventure, he promised that the scheme would take care of the monetary worries of trained girls and women. Our morale raised sky-high, we got down to training in earnest.

Each of the "Seven-Sisters" earned a good report. Brig. Gyan

Singh said that our performance was much better than that of the men.

By the end of our stay the Brigadier had become like a father to us, and, at my suggestion, we began to address him as "Chhote Chacha".

When Chhote Chacha left Uttarkashi on 28 February, 1983 we were in tears. But he promised to return in three months to

The Seven-Sisters

help us run our own adventure programmes. Meanwhile, we were asked to take local children rock-climbing. The prospect of running our own programme was very exciting. In preparation I used to walk and jog from Nakuri to the rock-climbing area in Tekhla, 18 kilometres each way. This practice greatly helped in toughening me up for the climbing challenges which lay ahead.

The Brigadier arrived as promised on 1 June. He brought 25 sets of camping and trekking equipment for us to run two adventure courses for girls. With the army's help he also arranged that a tentage camp be put up at Tekhla.

The first group from Jamshedpur had 13 girls. The second party from Meghalaya had 15 lively Khasi girls from Shillong. The groups were made up to 20 for each course by taking local girls on scholarship. I was made director of the course and Vijaya Pant deputy-director. Jobs like quarter-master and medical assistant were allotted in turn to the other "Seven-Sisters". We were paid an honorarium for our work on the courses.

The programme was varied. There were three days of rock-climbing followed by a day for river crossing, besides camping, learning the use of mountaineering ropes, cooking, and safety in the wilderness. A forest ranger accompanied us and told us about the flora and wildlife of the region. Including two short and one long trek, we covered nearly 150 kms. and climbed up and down a height difference of nearly 2,500 to 3,000 m.

Our highest camp during the long trek was at picturesque Dodital at nearly 3,000 m. Here lush green deodars bordered a beautiful lake full of cold-water fish, including the lovely rainbow trout. We halted here for three nights. We also went to the top of the ridge to Bakriya-Khal at nearly 4,000 m. It was the first contact with snow for many of the girls and they were like playful kittens, rolling and sliding on the snow-field and tossing snowballs at one another. Before returning to Dodital they were given some elementary lessons in snow craft, including glissading.

I conducted the first course with Vijaya's help under the supervision of Chhote Chacha. He guided us but left us to work out the details. His most memorable contribution, however, were

With Tenzing

camp for the "Everest '84" expedition held on Mana mountain, beyond Badrinath. Initially I ran a fever and had to stay back at the Base Camp. I was worried that if I didn't get well and complete the selection camp, I would not be considered for the Everest team. That would be the end of my cherished dream. Fortunately, I recovered quickly and completely and was able to catch up with the lost training schedule quite easily. During this camp the stress was on practice and not the peak. However, I was able to climb up to nearly 7,500 m. on Mana, my highest till then.

This camp was crucial for entry into the Everest team so everyone strove to do their best. All the others were experienced mountaineers, I was the only novice. However, I felt that I had acquitted myself well in technical climbing, physical effort and in getting acclimatized to heights. Though I could not say where I would stand in the final merit list, I was confident about my prowess as a climber.

When the camp was closed, the participants were required to ferry loads to the road-head. The majority seemed full of strength and vitality and many rushed down with their loads. I moved carefully and kept a slow and steady pace. Major Prem Chand saw me and remarked, "That is the pace you will have to keep on Everest, Bachendri."

What could he mean? Could I dare hope I had made the grade?

THE TEAM

Ours was to be India's fourth expedition to Everest. The first two in 1960 and 1962 had been turned back by bad weather within 200 and 130 m. of the summit. In the third, as many as nine climbers had scaled Everest.

Of the 170 or so people from all over the world, who had climbed Everest only four had been women. But India's young women had shown their mettle on many mountains. Three had climbed the"Killer" Nanda Devi (7,816 m.) in 1981. Thus the main aim of this expedition was to see at least one, and if possible, more Indian women on the Everest summit.

I was on tenterhooks awaiting the announcement of the Everest team. My family shared my tension and my brother Bachan, himself a mountaineer, specially came home to be with me. My chances of inclusion in the team were a subject of daily discussion. I pinned my hopes on my performance which had been generously lauded by my instructors. Besides, Col. Prem Chand had not only dubbed me "Everest Material" in 1981, but more recently had hinted that I might be included in the Everest team.

According to the evening AIR news bulletin on 18 October, 1983, Col. D.K. Khullar had been selected to lead the Everest expedition and the team would be announced the following morning. I heard the news at Uttarkashi where I had been invited as a guest instructor on a girls' Basic Mountaineering Course.

I hardly slept that night. Getting up well before sunrise I was at the newspaper vendor's several hours before the boy came with the packets of dailies. My heart in my mouth, I snatched a

Col. Khullar

copy of the paper and opened it with trembling hands. My eyes raced impatiently across the list of the Everest team till finally they rested on the one name I was looking for—Bachendri Pal.

I later learnt that despite my being a newcomer to mountaineering my selection had been unanimous.

I ran straight to the sweetmeat shop and, after buying some *ladoos*, hopped into the first vehicle which was going towards my village. As I got out of the truck on the road below my village, I looked up and saw Bachan waiting for me on the terrace. He ran down and met me halfway. I had already shouted the good news to him. When we met he hugged me and danced with excitement. By then the entire family and many others had collected. Sweets were distributed. My mother shed tears of joy and my father kept looking at me with pride, stroking my head lovingly.

Six other women had been selected. All were strong climbers and experienced mountaineers. Compared to them, I was a novice. Besides Col. D.K. Khullar and Lieut. Col. Prem Chand, the team included 11 other men.

Everesters

TRAINING FOR EVEREST

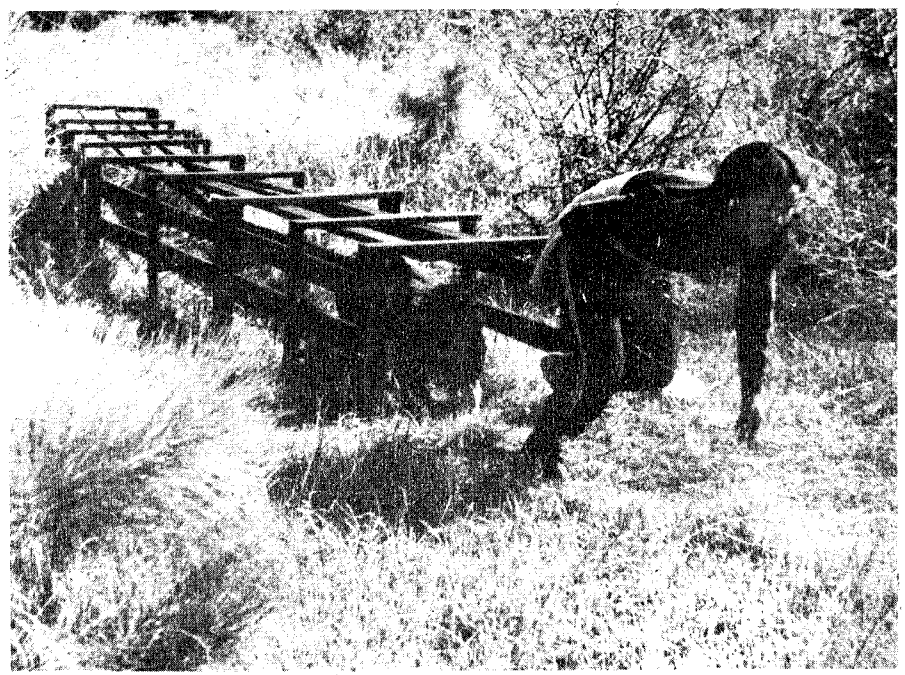
Brig. Gyan Singh had been confident that Chandra Didi and I would be chosen for the "Everest '84" team and had prepared a pre-Everest self-training programme which we started as soon as the selection was announced. Briefly, the training entailed climbing nearly 600 m. every day with a load of 12 to 15 kilogrammes on our backs and jogging eight to ten kilometres.

To match the very hard physical work, we had to eat special protein-rich foods—plenty of milk, greens and, of course, sugar. Our daily intake had to consist of 3,500 to 4,000 calories.

People in Nakuri were amused to see me climb up from the bottom of the hill to the top of the ridge with a rucksack full of stones every morning. Someone remarked that I was perhaps trying to restore the height of the eroded hills. My father would join in the fun. "Bachendri has found no job to her liking after her big degrees," he would explain. "She is now preparing herself to be a construction labourer." He would chuckle and repeat this joke to anyone he met. My simple mother, on the other hand, shed worried tears to see her daughter lugging stones to the mountain top.

We reported to the IMF in New Delhi at the beginning of December 1983. For nearly five weeks, the seven female mountaineers were put through a gruelling training programme. We spent hours in the gymnasium in toughening up our abdominal, dorsal and other climbing muscles. There was also plenty of bending and stretching with rhythmic breathing exercises. Prolonged swimming and jogging helped build up our stamina and improved lung functioning for the maximum use of oxygen under physiological stress.

Then at the height of winter in January 1984, Lieut. Col. Prem Chand, an uncompromising trainer, took us women to Gulmarg and for a month he made us climb up and down steep slopes covered with deep snow.



Training: negotiating obstacles

Brig. Gyan Singh was aware of my desire for economic independence so that I could pursue my love for mountaineering. Immediately after the "Seven-Sisters" programmes in June 1983, he contacted the Tata Iron and Steel Company (TISCO) in Jamshedpur and persuaded them to employ me for the promotion of adventure. My inclusion in the Everest team helped and I was made Sports Assistant. I was on the company's pay-roll thereafter and also received a substantial daily allowance for my participation in the Everest expedition.

I could now concentrate on the expedition and on reaching the top.

EVEREST—MY FIRST EXPEDITION

The Everest expedition left Delhi for Kathmandu by plane on 7 March. A strong advance party had left much earlier to open the route through the treacherous icefall before we reached the Base Camp.

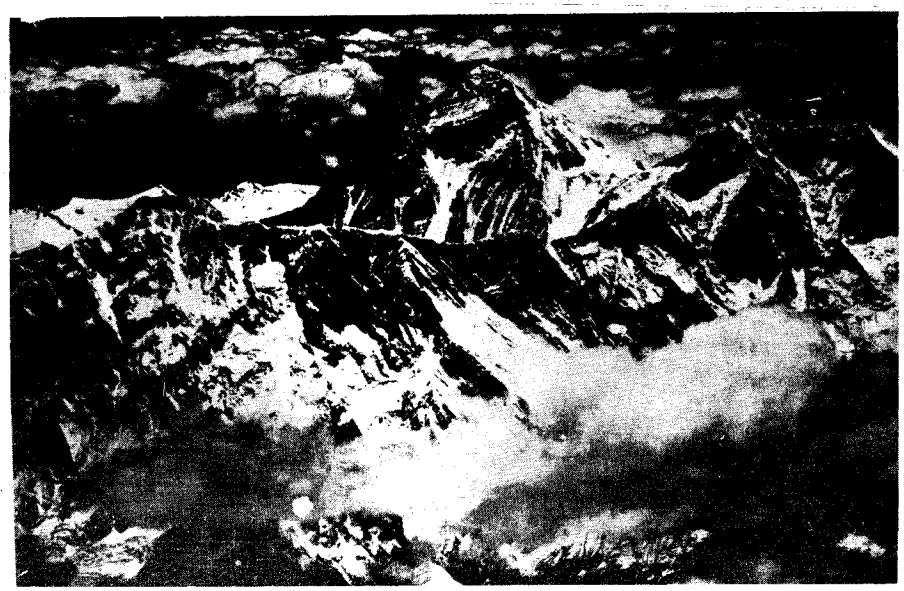
After a few days in Kathmandu, we moved to Ziri, four to five hours' drive away. Then we had a leisurely eight-day trek to Namche Bazar. Going against the grain of the mountain, we climbed up and down nearly a thousand metres every day, which toughened us up and helped in acclimatization to high altitudes. On the way we met the friendly, cheerful people of the region, particularly the Sherpas.

Namche Bazar, is the most important township in Sherpaland. Most of our Sherpas came from here and the neighbouring villages. It was at Namche Bazar that I had my first view of Everest, popularly called Sagarmatha by the Nepalese. This name appealed to me.

Gazing at Everest I could see an enormous snow-plume, a kind of banner which seemed to fly out of its summit. I was told that this phenomenon was due to the wind blowing at 150 km. or more per hour near the peak's upper reaches and driving the powder snow off the mountain. The snow-plume could be 10 km. or more long. Anyone attempting the peak had to face these storms on the south-east ridge, particularly in bad weather. This was to haunt me; yet, I was strangely fascinated by Everest and drawn to its tough challenge.

We hill people have always worshipped the mountains. My overpowering emotion at this awe-inspiring spectacle was, therefore, devotional. I folded my hands and bowed my head to Sagarmatha.

After a day here we reached the famous Thyangboche monastery where the incarnate Lama blessed us and prayed for our success and safe return. Thyangboche was not only beautiful but its height, over 4,000 m., was suitable for acclimatization training. We halted here for two days before moving to our main acclimatization training camp at Pheriche.



The Everest massif

THE CHAOTIC KHUMBU ICEFALL

When we reached Pheriche on 26 March, we got the shocking news of a Sherpa porter having been killed in an avalanche. An enormous snow-slide had swept down from Lhola, a depression on the steep ridge to the left of the expedition's route to the Khumbu icefall. Of a ferry party of 16 Sherpa porters, one had died and four had been injured.

Noticing the gloom the news had cast on members of the expedition, our leader, Col. Khullar explained that on an expedition of the magnitude of Everest, danger, and sometimes death, had to be taken in one's stride. "We must not be unduly disturbed or deterred by one single mishap," he said.

The deputy leader, Prem Chand, who was leading the advance party, returned to Pheriche on 26 March. He briefed us on the nature of our first major hurdle, the Khumbu icefall. He said that his party had opened the route to Camp I (6,900 m.), just above the lip of the icefall, and that all major obstacles had been taken care of by bridging, fixed ropes and route-marking with flags. But he reminded us that the glacier was a river of ice and the icefall portion was on the move. The erratic shifting of the ice base might undo all the work done, and we might have to reopen

Icefall

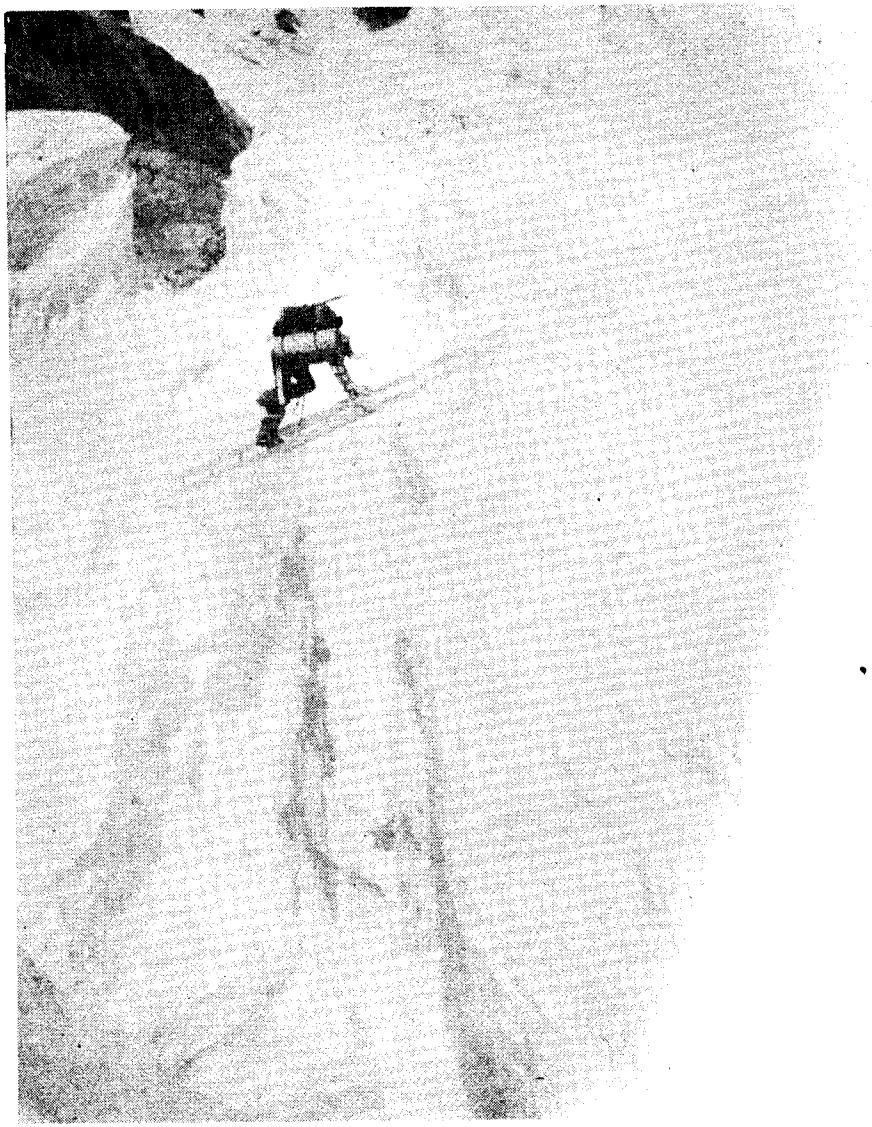
the route. My curiosity about these hazards was stronger than my fears but I concealed my feelings from the others.

Before we reached the Base Camp, we learnt of another death —a kitchen attendant had died as a result of acclimatization failure. We were certainly not starting on a promising note.

We halted a night at Gorakhshep, from where I went for a small acclimatization climb to "Kala Pathar". From there I had a clear view of Everest, the South Col, Lhotse and the icefall. It was an awe-inspiring sight. My feeling on viewing Sagarmatha a second time was again devotional. I folded my hands involuntarily and bowed my head.

I had seen the Everest summit twice earlier but from a distance. On reaching the Base Camp the next day I saw the rest of the Everest massif and its satellites. I stood transfixed, gaping at the much ruffled solid river of ice enclosed by the towering trio: Everest, Lhotse and Nuptse. We could see that the Khumbu glacier dived nearly 600 m. in less than a kilometre, flowing between the near vertical slopes of the western shoulder of Everest to our left and the near shoulder of Nuptse to our right. It was the sharp drop in altitude that caused the icefall. Its backdrop was the fort-like turreted top of Lhotse, the fourth highest mountain in the world. Facing the strong westerlies, Lhotse could hold no snow near the top. Its rocky crown was therefore greyish black in colour.

The icefall itself was a chaotic cascade of ice blocks and leaning ice towers. We were told that the movement of the glacier caused frequent ice-quakes which triggered off the instant toppling of huge ice slabs and other features often balanced precariously at dangerous angles. The thought of a fissure opening up on a harmless surface and developing into a gaping



Negotiating a wide crevasse

deep crevasse was very frightening. And even more terrifying was the knowledge that throughout our stay, the icefall would be the daily trudging ground of about a dozen climbers and ferry porters.

Camp I (6,000 m.) was just above the icefall. A couple of hours of climbing steadily nearly 500 m. over a crevasse-ridden high valley popularly called the Western cwm (pronounced coom), brought one to Camp II which was the advance base. Camp III (7,200 m.) was on the exposed Lhotse face and Camp IV at the South Col (7,900 m.) was the last firm base on a windy, cold, inhospitable saddle between Everest and Lhotse. The one-tent summit camp would have to be established at about 8,500 m. on the dangerous south-east ridge leading to the summit.

I was desperately keen to get near the icefall. The same evening along with some others, I went up to the crampon-point where the icefall started. This was where the climbers strapped on their climbing boots, their crampons or the steel attachment with 10 to 12 spikes to avoid slipping on the ice or hard frozen snow.

The following day most of the newcomers ferried loads to a point halfway up the icefall. Dr Minoo Mehta showed us the makeshift bridges with aluminium ladders, logs and ropes, the fixed ropes on ice walls and steep traverses, as well as other evidence of our advance party's engineering handiwork.

The third day was earmarked for a practice climb by ferrying a load up the icefall to Camp I. Rita Gombu and I climbing together had a walkie-talkie and reported our step by step progress to the Base Camp. Col. Khullar was very happy when we announced our arrival, for we were the only two to have reached Camp I.

After we had been told about the topography of the area, I noticed that the Bulgarian expedition had their Base Camp next to ours. They were climbing by the difficult western ridge route and were to return from the summit along our route. We learnt later that five Bulgarians reached the summit but paid a very heavy price. Their first summiter, Christo Prodanov, accomplished a solo oxygenless ascent, but perished somewhere quite high up on his descent.

Opening the route and stocking high camps was a slow, exacting operation. Working in small groups and sometimes in pairs, we fixed the route with ropes, and made foot-holds and hand-holds. Camps II and III were established in good time. Ang Dorjee, Lopsang and Magan Bissa finally reached the South Col and set up Camp IV at 7,900 m. on 29 April. This was satisfactory progress.

When I was at the Base Camp in April, Tenzing visited us with his youngest daughter Deki and made a point of speaking to every expedition member and every Sherpa porter. When it was my turn, I introduced myself saying that I was an absolute beginner and that Everest was my first expedition. Tenzing laughed and told me that Everest was also his first expedition, but explained that he had to go seven times to Everest before he reached its summit. Then, putting his arm round my shoulder he said, "You look a strong mountain girl. You should reach the summit in your first attempt!" These words were to linger with me.

ASCENT PLAN BEGINS

By 1 May the stage was set to launch the ascent plan. Out of 20 loads of oxygen and equipment planned for the South Col, 12 had already reached. A large ferry carrying the required loads was expected to accompany the first summit party.

Col. Khullar had decided on a major push by three summit teams, grouped for the climb to the Col in two parties which were to start from the Base Camp on 5 and 6 May. The first party, comprising Prem Chand, Rita, Phu Dorjee, Chandra Prabha and Sirdar Ang Dorjee, reached the South Col on 7 May. On 8 May, Prem Chand, Rita and Ang Dorjee were to form the first summit team. They would make the attempt to get to the summit and return to the South Col in the evening. The same day (8 May) the second summit team made up of Phu Dorjee, Chandra Prabha and eight Sherpas was to establish the Summit Camp (V) at approximately 8,500 m.They were to stay the night there and attempt the peak the next morning and return to the South Col by the evening. The third summit team composed of ND Sherpa, Lopsang Tshering, Magan Bissa and I was to reach the South Col on 8 May and attempt the peak on the 9th. The success of this ambitious plan depended on a sufficient number of Sherpas being available to stock the South Col and summit camps.

But this was not to be. Against eight planned, only two Sherpas could go up with Phu Dorjee and Chandra Prabha. Prem Chand, therefore, decided on only one attempt by his party and gave his place to Phu Dorjee for the summit attempt. Chandra Prabha returned with him to the South Col. Phu Dorjee joined Rita and Ang Dorjee to spend the night at the Summit Camp.

The three started from the Summit Camp at 7 a.m. on 9 May. After only an hour's climb Ang Dorjee found that his feet were becoming very cold. Fearing frost bite, he decided to turn back. Rita who was with him was in two minds. Phu Dorjee, about 20 metres ahead, waited to see if she wanted to go up with him. Unsure of the weather (an 80 kilometre per hour wind blew and there was a thin, cloudy haze) Rita too decided to return.

Phu Dorjee's oxygen ran out when he was barely 200 m. short of his goal. But he possessed extraordinary stamina and determination. Dumping the equipment, he pressed on and was on the summit at 12.30 p.m. This extraordinary feat gave the expedition the peak and India its first oxygenless solo climb of Everest.

Our party made steady progress from Camp III to South Col on 8 May. I was climbing without oxygen because of a shortage of the gas. When I was still more than an hour from the South Col, I found it heavy going and slow, particularly because it was the steepest portion of the climb and a very cold wind had stirred up. Just then, I saw someone coming down along the Geneva Spur and wondered who could be going down from the South Col so late. It was ND Sherpa who had come down with an oxygen

cylinder for me. I was very touched by this thoughtful gesture. With the oxygen, the climb was quite easy.

Meanwhile, the Bulgarian first pair who had climbed the summit by the west ridge route were more than 24 hours late in completing the traverse by the South Col route. On his return from the summit, Phu Dorjee helped the exhausted summit pair. Later our leader cancelled our summit team's attempt on the 9th to divert ND and Lopsang to the rescue mission. The rest of us therefore returned to Camp II on 9 May.

The South Col: Camp IV

THE FATEFUL NIGHT

On the Buddha Purnima of 15–16 May, 1984, I was at Camp III, in a colourful nylon tentage camp perched on the ice-crusted steep slope of Lhotse. There were ten others in the camp. Lopsang Tshering shared my tent. ND Sherpa, and eight tough high-altitude Sherpa porters were in other tents. I was sleeping soundly when around 12.30 a.m. I was shaken awake by a hard object hitting me on the back of my head and simultaneously by a loud explosion. Then I felt a cold, extremely heavy mass creeping over my body and crushing me. I could hardly breathe.

What had happened? A tall serac (ice tower) on the Lhotse glacier directly above our camp had cracked, crashed down and developed into a massive avalanche. This enormous mass of ice blocks, crushed ice and frozen snow thundering down the near vertical slope at the speed of an express train, devastated our camp which was directly in its path. Practically everyone was hurt. It was a miracle no one was killed.

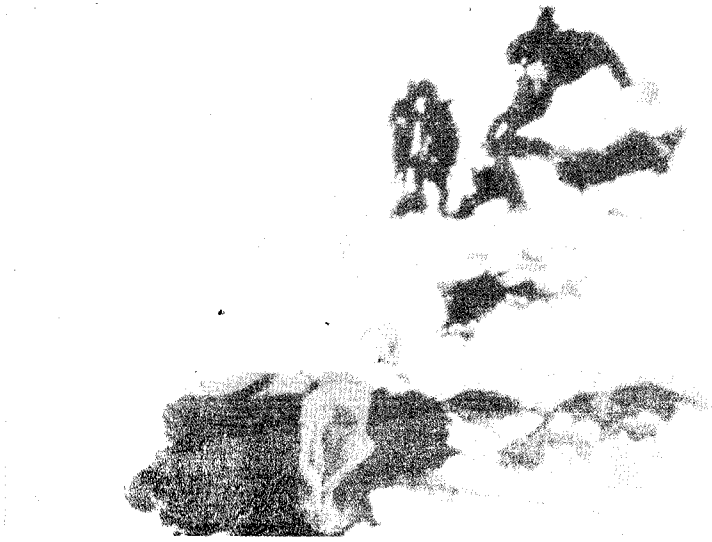
Lopsang was able to tear his way out of our tent with his Swiss knife and immediately began frantically to try and rescue me. Delay would have meant sure death. Heaving and pushing away

the large ice slabs, he dug out the hardened snow around me and succeeded in pulling me out of the ice grave.

No tent had been left standing except the kitchen shelter. Lopsang and I clambered there and found ND talking on the walkie-talkie with the leader at Camp II. ND said he had broken some ribs. One Sherpa had fractured his leg and there were quite a few other injuries. Groans of pain and cries for help were audible from all sides. But ND assured the leader at Camp II that all was not lost. The expedition still had a lot of fight in it.

By now most of us had gathered in or near the kitchen tent. From my first-aid pouch, I gave everyone pain-killer tablets and prepared hot drinks. Being useful helped disperse the cloud of gloom and depression that enveloped me.

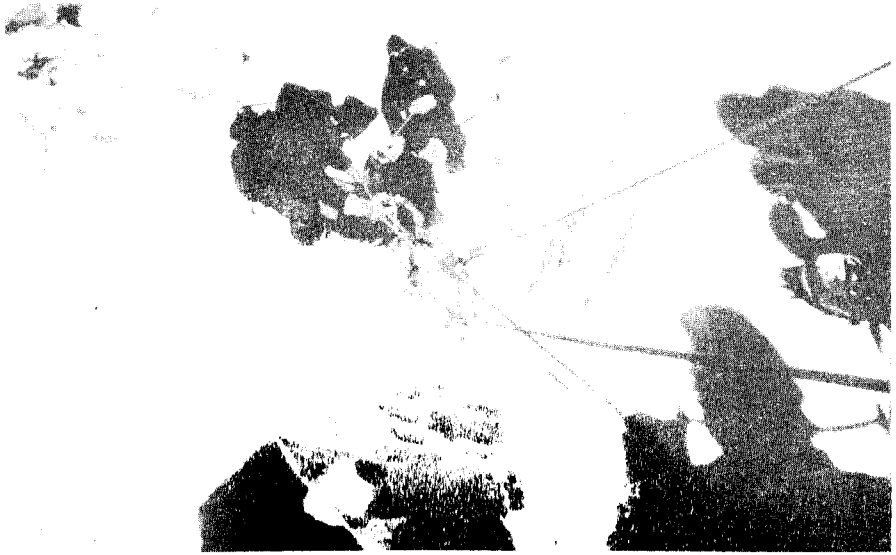
The leader promised to send rescue parties without delay. KI, Jai and Bissa, hearing the conversation on their walkie-talkie at Camp I, set off immediately while it was still night. From Camp II too a rescue team of four and the Camp II cook moved into action.



Camp III after the avaianche

Well before dawn we began to dig out our equipment. I was terribly worried about the image of Goddess Durga which I had in my rucksack. Every morning and evening I took it out and drew inspiration and strength from it. So my first act on finding my rucksack was to thrust my hand into the side pocket. To my relief my fingers encountered the ice cold metallic image. I held the holy image tightly and placing it on my forehead, felt that I had everything I wanted. I had Shakti in my arms. The Shakti, which had saved my life a few hours earlier and the Shakti which, I was now sure, would lead me onwards and upwards. The experience of the night had drained all fear out of me.

The rescue teams arrived soon after and by 8 a.m. on 16 May we were nearly all at Camp II. The Sherpa with the fractured leg was brought down on an improvised stretcher. In our leader



Rescuing injured colleague

Khullar's words, "It was a remarkable feat of high altitude rescue work."

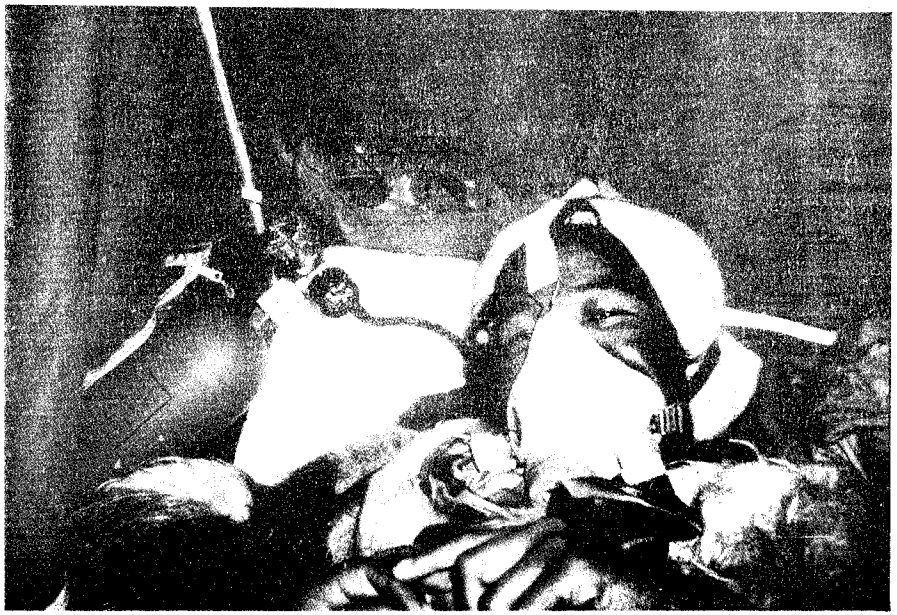
The bump at the back of my head had now begun to throb. I felt uncomfortable but kept it to myself, occasionally pressing the bump with my palm.

All nine male members had to be sent to the Base Camp because of injuries or shattered nerves. Then Col. Khullar turned to me and asked if I was frightened.

"Yes."

"Would you also like to go down?"

"No," I replied without hesitation.



Sleeping at high altitude with oxygen mask

SUSPENSEFUL DRAMA

KI Kumar, Jai Bahuguna, Magan Bissa and Dr Minoo Mehta were to form the next summit party. I was given the privilege of providing the crucial female element. Lhatoo, Pulzor and all available high altitude Sherpas were to be in the support role. Resources permitting, the support party would make their attempt after the first summit party. There was to be no woman in the second party.

To conserve oxygen for the final ascent, all the male members had to do without oxygen up to the South Col. However, when Bissa's feet became numb after he had climbed half-way, he was advised to switch on his oxygen. I was told to conserve my energy for the next day's final climb by inhaling oxygen at about two litres per minute. My noticeable fitness on reaching the South Col and on the day of the ascent proved that this decision was a wise one.

As soon as I reached the South Col Camp, I began to prepare for the final climb the next day. I collected food, cooking gas and some oxygen cylinders. When Bissa arrived at 1.30 p.m. he found me heating water for tea. KI,.Jai and Minoo were still far behind. I was concerned because I had to climb to the summit

with them the next day. They were slow because they were carrying heavy loads and climbing without oxygen.

Late in the afternoon I decided to go down to help my team mates and filling a thermos flask with juice and another with hot tea, I stepped out into the icy wind.

I met Minoo just as I was leaving the camp area. KI and Jai were still some way behind. I saw Jai just below the top of the Geneva Spur. He accepted the drinks gratefully but tried to dissuade me from going further. But I had to meet KI too. After climbing down a little further, I saw KI. He was flabbergasted when he saw me. "Why did you take such a risk, Bachendri?" he shouted. I told him firmly that I was a climber like the others. That was why I was on the expedition. I was physically fit so why should I not help my team mates? KI smiled and drank thirstily but refused to let me carry part of his kit.

A little later Lhatoo and Bissa came down from the South Col Camp to meet us and we returned to such safety and comfort as the South Col, deservedly known as the "most inhospitable place on earth", could offer.

Heating a meal

I KEEP MY TRYST WITH EVEREST

I got up at 4 in the morning, melted snow and brewed tea. After a light breakfast of a few biscuits and half a slab of chocolate I left my tent at around 5.30 a.m. Ang Dorjee was standing outside. No one else was about.

Ang Dorjee was going to climb without oxygen. But because of this his feet would get very cold. He thus wanted to avoid long exposure at heights and a night at the Summit Camp. He had therefore to either get to the peak and back to the South Col the same day or abandon the attempt.

He was keen to start immediately and asked if I would like to go with him. Going to the top from the South Col and back in a day would be strenuous and tough and there was the risk of Ang Dorjee turning back if his feet got too cold. I, however, had full confidence in Ang Dorjee as well as in my stamina and climbing capability. Besides no one else was ready to move at that time.

At 6.20 when Ang Dorjee and I stepped out from the South Col, it was a perfect day. There was a gentle breeze but the cold was intense. I was, however, warm in my well-insulated climbing gear. We climbed unroped. Ang Dorjee set a steady pace but I had no difficulty keeping up with him.

The steep frozen slopes were as hard and brittle as sheets of glass. We had to use the ice-axe and I had to kick really hard to get the front teeth of the crampons to bite into the frozen surface. I took every step very deliberately on the dangerous stretches.

In less than two hours we reached the Summit Camp. Ang Dorjee looked back and asked if I was tired. I replied, "No," to his surprise and delight. He told me that the earlier summit party had taken four hours to reach the Summit Camp and added that if we could keep our present pace, we would be on the summit by 1 p.m.

Lhatoo was following us and caught up with us when we rested below the South Summit. After drinking some tea we moved on. Lhatoo had brought a nylon rope so Ang Dorjee and I roped up while Lhatoo walked in the middle, holding the rope with one hand, more for balance than security.

Lhatoo noticed that I had been climbing with oxygen at about two and a half litres per minute against the normal four for these heights. After he increased the oxygen flow on my regulator I found even the steeper stretches comparatively easy.

Beyond the South Summit the breeze increased. At that height the eddies of strong winds whipped up the powder snow, reducing visibility to nil. On many occasions, I had to get into a crouching position with my back to the onslaught of the icy wind saturated with fine particles of bone dry powder snow.

It was terrifying to stand erect on a knife-edge ridge, with a sheer drop on either side. I had to dig my ice-axe deep and secure myself by attaching the waist-strap to the ice-axe head. There was some tricky climbing between the South Summit and what is popularly known as Hillary's Step. Ang Dorjee and Lhatoo were already over it, but I was still negotiating its vertical face when

Ang Dorjee gesticulated towards the top. I was thrilled. The goal was near. With renewed vigour I was on top of the step in seconds. The sun had made the snow soft and climbing was easier here than it had been earlier.

We trudged in the heavy powder snow for some time. Then the gradient started easing off noticeably. A few steps later I saw that after only a couple of metres there was no upward climb. The slope plunged steeply down.

My heart stood still. It dawned on me that success was within reach. And at 1.07 p.m. on 23 May, 1984, I stood on top of Everest, the first Indian woman to have done so.

On the summit

HOMAGE TO SAGARMATHA

There was hardly enough place for two to stand side by side on top of the Everest cone. Thousands of metres of near vertical drop on all sides made safety our foremost consideration and we first anchored ourselves securely by digging our ice-axes into the snow. That done, I sank on my knees, and putting my forehead on the snow, kissed Sagarmatha's crown. Without getting up, I took out the image of Durga Ma and my *Hanuman Chalisa* from my rucksack. I wrapped these in a red cloth which I had brought and, after saying a short prayer, buried them in the snow. At this moment of joy my thoughts went to my father and mother.

As I rose, I folded my hands and bowed in respect to Ang Dorjee, my rope-leader, who had encouraged and led me to my goal. I also congratulated him for his second ascent of Everest without oxygen. He embraced me and whispered in my ear, "You climb good—very happy, Didi."

A little later Sonam Pulzor arrived and began taking photographs.

By then Lhatoo had given the news of the "four atop Everest" to our leader. The walkie-talkie was then passed on to me. Col. Khullar was delighted with our success. After congratulating me he said, "I would also like to congratulate your parents for your unique achievement." He added that the country was proud of me and that I would return to a world which would be quite different from the one I had left behind.

We summiters embraced and thumped one another's backs. Nepalese, Indian and, for my sake, the NAF "Seven-Sisters" and TISCO flags were hoisted and photographed.

We spent 43 minutes on the summit. The towering giants Lhotse, Nuptse and Makalu were dwarfed by our mountain. I collected a few samples of stone from a bare patch near the peak.

With Ang Dorjee and Lhatoo on south-east ridge

We started our downhill journey at 1.55 p.m. I knew I would have to be specially careful during the return trip, for more accidents occurred on descending than when climbing up. But I was unaware of one fundamental hazard. I took off my snow goggles on the snowless and dark rocky patches assuming that snowblindness was only caused by the glare of the sun's rays reflected from the snow and, besides, the atmosphere was hazy. Snowblindness however, is due to strong ultraviolet rays at high altitudes and has nothing to do with the snow or the glare.

I paid a heavy price for my ignorance. Both my eyes were affected and I suffered intense pain. On our return to the camp I had to take a sleeping-pill—the only one I had during my stay on Everest.

Though Ang Dorjee moved fast, I found I was reasonably sure-footed in downhill climbing, even at the veteran Sherpa's pace. When we were still some distance from the South Col, to my astonishment, I saw Magan Bissa coming up. It was dangerous to be on the exposed south-east ridge in the evening when the temperature dropped sharply, besides the usual dangers of height and environment. Bissa's rucksack was filled with oxygen cylinders and thermos flasks. He congratulated us and gave us some hot drinks and juice.

Then he went up to help Lhatoo and Pulzor and gave them hot drinks. Pulzor had no oxygen mask so Bissa gave him his own. Lhatoo reached the South Col at 6 p.m. while Bissa brought Pulzor to safety on his rope at 7 p.m.

Ang Dorjee and I had arrived at the South Col at 5 p.m. Everyone complimented us for doing the South Col-Summit-South Col trip in only 10 hours 40 minutes, including the halt at the top.

As I was entering my tent I overheard Major KI Kumar talking to Col. Khullar on the wireless. "Believe it or not, Sir," he said excitedly, "Bachendri is already back in just three hours. And, she looks as fresh as she was when she started climbing up this morning."

After the climb: the way back to South Col

THE AGONY OF FAME

The months following my return from Everest were bewildering. But the first week in Delhi was downright nerve-racking. I had a packed 18-hour or longer daily schedule. I was presented to VVIPs and there were press conferences, speeches, addresses and interviews.

I received the IMF's coveted gold medal for excellence in mountaineering and numerous honours and accolades which I cannot even remember. The Padma Shri and prestigious Arjuna Award were announced. The functions and fuss were undeniably gratifying to the ego but were extremely exacting on the nerves and body. I would have given anything for an uninterrupted 24-hour sleep.

I would not say that I didn't enjoy being the focus of attention and praise but my greatest desire was to be with my parents and sisters and brothers and meet the friends I had in my village, Nakuri.

I set off from Delhi on a sultry June day and arrived at Rishikesh after an eight-hour drive. As the car climbed up the hill road, it began to pour. But despite the lashing rain, men, women and children huddled by the wayside villages to welcome their daughter who had, according to them, brought glory to Garhwal, and to Bharat. They had also hastily put up welcome arches. I was running far behind schedule as I halted to receive their greetings and by the time I reached the district border a large crowd had been waiting for several hours to greet me. At 9 p.m. the motorcade reached my village. Despite the rain, the entire village seemed to have come out to welcome me. Beating drums, blowing conches and wind instruments and chanting mantras, talking and shouting they showered me with affection, each one wishing to garland me.

As I pushed my way through the jostling crowd, my eyes searched for two faces. Suddenly I saw them. My father and mother were quietly standing outside a thatch hut. They looked utterly overwhelmed.

I ran to my mother and fell in her arms. Mother and daughter held each other and cried and cried. I looked over my mother's shoulder and saw the blurred figure of my father also crying and looking at me disbelievingly.

DREAMS COME TRUE

On 11 July, I presented TISCO's Chairman, Mr Mody, the TISCO flag which I had hoisted on the summit of Everest. Mr Mody announced my promotion to Manager, Adventure Programmes and said I was to head the Tata Youth Adventure Centre and be solely in charge of all adventure activities in Jamshedpur. In fact, Mr Mody's encouragement and help for adventure and sports has made it possible for many like myself to pursue their field of interest and excel in it.

It is given to very few to have their dreams come true. I have not only got everything I wanted but have been given far more than I could have wished for. Climbing was in my blood. In the three years before Everest, I had done more climbing than almost anyone I know. Then, of course, climbing Everest in 1984 on my first-ever expedition on this great peak. In 1986 I climbed Mont Blanc the highest mountain in Europe and also climbed in four Alpine countries with experts of the latest techniques and trends. I have given talks on mountaineering in several countries and am on a number of the Indian Government's policy-making committees on youth.

But I also love to be with children. Now, I am paid handsomely to teach young people adventure—camping, trekking, rock-climbing, river crossing, exposing them to the wilderness. I give particular attention to girls in my programmes, for I feel that in India we neglect them and discourage them from outdoor pursuits. The love of adventure and living dangerously is as necessary for girls as it is for boys for it makes for courage, boldness and initiative.

Rock climbing in Austria

I have met many important people. The two who have inspired me most, however, are Indira Gandhi and Sherpa Tenzing Norgay. When I met Mrs Gandhi after Everest, she said, "We want hundreds of Bachendris in the country," and urged me to reach out to rural girls.

I met Tenzing the last time in December 1985. He told me that Bachendri no longer belonged to herself. Now everybody had a claim on my attention, my time and on my smiles. He pointed out that climbing Everest and becoming famous had its rewards, but it also had its responsibilities.

Climbing Everest has fulfilled my deepest aspirations, and given me everything that I have. I can ask for no more.

With Mrs. Gandhi

Lhotse face

Printed at Gajendra Printing Press, Naveen Shahdara Delhi-110 032